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COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF A COMMUNITY HEALING PROCESS

Question: Are Aboriginal community healing processes cost-effective alternatives to the traditional criminal justice process?

Background: Many Aboriginal communities are returning to their traditional teachings. Currently, there are a number of community justice initiatives that attempt to build capacity in Aboriginal communities. Community justice initiatives are programs that are developed, implemented, and run by the community. These programs typically focus on repairing the harm that has resulted from crime, and attempt to facilitate the healing process of the offenders, the victims, and the community as a whole. Evaluations of these types of programs have produced some positive results; however, evaluating the success of these programs in terms of healing and community safety is only the first step. Further examination is required to determine whether community justice initiatives are not only an effective option for crime control, but also a cost-effective option.

Method: Researchers conducted a cost-benefit analysis of Hollow Water's Community Holistic Circle Healing (CHCH) process. The CHCH process was designed to address the effects of inter-generational sexual abuse and has been serving the needs of the Hollow Water First Nation in Manitoba for the past 10 years. The goal of the cost-benefit analysis was to provide a summary of value-added benefits of the CHCH process. Financial estimates of government programs and the traditional justice system were examined and various interviews were conducted with community members, CHCH staff, social resource people, and various justice system participants to identify the benefits of this community healing process.

Answer: It was found that during the first ten years of operation, the CHCH process was a more cost-efficient option than the traditional criminal justice process. During this time, the government contributed approximately $2.4 million dollars to the community run program. Similar government-run services would have cost between $6 million and $15 million. Researchers approximated that for every $1 that the *provincial* government contributed to the CHCH program, they would have had to spend approximately $3.75 for pre-incarceration costs, prison and probation costs. For every $1 that the *federal* government spent on the program, it would have had to spend between $2 and $12 on incarceration and parole costs. From the community perspective, for every $2 the government spends, the community receives between $6 and $15 worth of services and value-added benefits. This financial analysis demonstrated that taxpayers were receiving value for their money and that the CHCH program is a cost-efficient alternative.

The Hollow Water process shows promising results; however, concluding that community

healing processes will result in cost savings to governments is premature. Financial savings are an important element, but there may also be value-added benefits for the community and society as a whole. Assigning dollar values to many of these benefits is difficult. Health and wellness is just one example of a value-added benefit of a community holistic approach that is difficult to measure in financial terms. Researchers in Hollow Water observed a significant shift in overall health and wellness, indicated by more members returning to the community, more people completing their education, better parenting skills, the empowerment of community individuals, broadening of community resources, an increased sense of safety, and a return to traditional ceremony. The findings from the program evaluation suggested that through prevention and community training, the CHCH program resulted in decreased reliance on outside resources. The Hollow Water CHCH healing processes can be a cost-effective alternative to the traditional criminal justice process. Community justice initiatives appear to be a step towards improving the quality of life for Aboriginal people and their communities.

Policy Implications:

1. Capacity building in Aboriginal communities has benefits for both the Aboriginal community and Canadian taxpayers.
2. Cost-benefit analyses are valuable, but they are rare. Comprehensive evaluations of community justice initiatives, including cost-benefit analyses, are needed to build a stronger knowledge base for policy development on these initiatives.
3. Evaluations of well-established programs may offer insights not available from evaluations of newly established programs.

Source: Couture, J., Parker, T., Couture, R., & Laboucane, P. (2001). *A cost-benefit analysis of Hollow Water's Community Holistic Circle Healing Process.* (Aboriginal Peoples Collections 2001). Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada.

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